Performance Space: Distributed v. Consolidated

Beth Weinstein

was a project architect in the Paris office of Jean Nouvel before founding her own practice, Architecture Agency, which focuses on collaborations with visual and performing artists, in and out of the proscenium space. As an Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona, she teaches design, technology, and leads collaborative projects and seminars linking architecture and dance/performance. Her research and writing on architecture and choreography has been published in the *Journal of Architectural Education*, *Places*, and the *Architect's Newspaper,* and has been presented in the US, Australia, Europe and Mexico. Honors include the Architectural League's Young Architect's Award, and residencies at France's Casa de Velazquez and Tucson's Museum of Contemporary Art.

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NOW/NEXT Performance Space at the Crossroads – Architecture Section of PQ 2011

What is *NOW*? What is *NEXT*? These are the questions put forth by Dorita Hannah, Commissioner of the Architecture Section of PQ 2011. In *Exhibition on the Stage: Reflections on the 2007 PQ*, Hannah mourned the lack of any gold-medal-winning architectural proposals that year and declared that theater architecture was in a state of crisis. She insisted, however, upon the potential for "the architecture housing the event (to be) an event itself." One could have asked where theater architecture had gone (wrong), and if it had, in fact, "left the building." Perhaps the answer was that award-winning theater architecture could not be found because all recognizable forms of architectural containers had been deconstructed and redistributed across the city and landscape, or that their space were rendered imperceptible due to the mutability of their form.

The architecture exhibition was titled *NOW/NEXT: Performance Space at the Crossroads*, and the exhibition itself was re-identified as an "open spatial laboratory." Many of the spaces of performance presented at PQ 2011 Architecture Section had indeed left the building to participate in larger networks and landscapes. Many had squirmed out of fixed building configurations to celebrate their multiple performing and transforming spatial qualities, facilitated by conceptual and material construction from kits of component parts. The two entries to the architecture section that garnered PQ 2011 gold medals (Greece and Mexico), in addition to many others, celebrated the space of
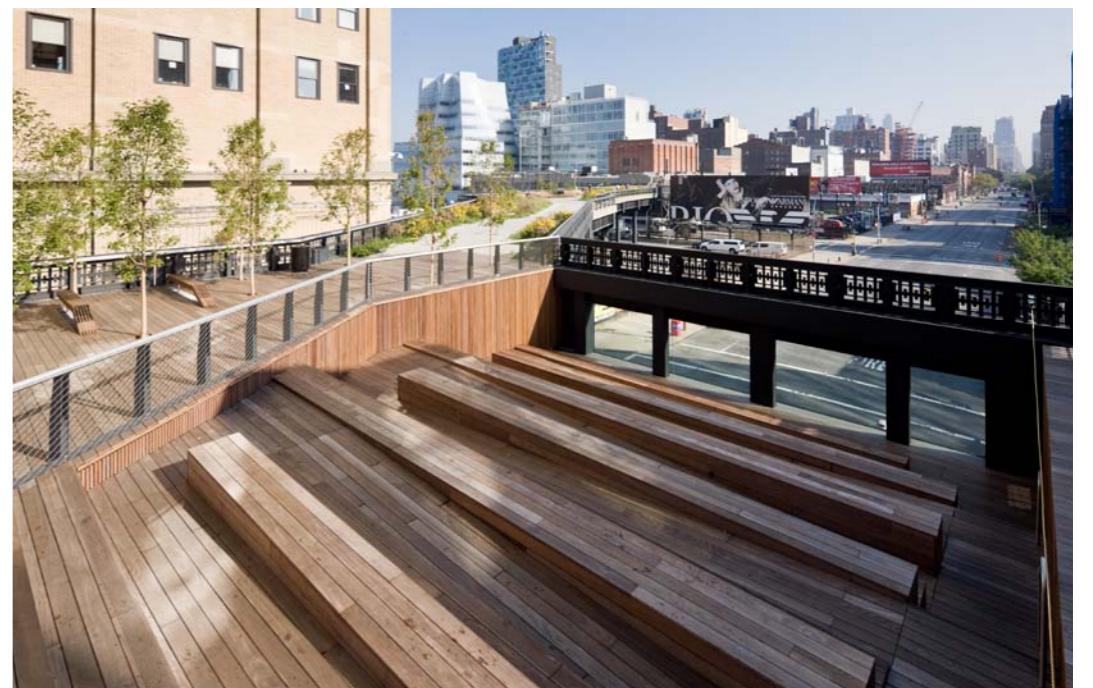
James Corner, Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro – High Line, New York

performance as an open-ended site, system, or strategy, both through the design of the exhibition and through the works presented.

The networked and system-based nature of many of the performance and performative spaces was a clear counterpoint to the very few theater-buildings as objects. This reflected tensions that can readily be found in architectural practice in general, and particularly in architectural academia and the experimental work of young practitioners: tension between the space of culture as iconic object (smooth, gift-wrapped, to be unpacked) and performative strategy (emerging from open-ended, networked, system-based logics).

In its first issue of the current decade, the *Architectural Record* (January 2011) summed up the previous decade as characterized by—amongst a dozen themes—renewed interest in urbanism and spectacle buildings by brand-name architects, by excess and disaster, by information modeling and digital fabrication, and by shifts towards locally/globally focused practice and by the environment.[1] My observation of the spaces created and imagined during the last years reveals additional themes: growing strategies for re-use both of materials and structures, creating impact through smaller, often ephemeral, spatially distributed networks of structures, for designing and building spatial components at full scale assisted by digital fabrication, with a focus on "performance," and in all of these cases flexible, ground-up strategies that can adapt to local conditions, in lieu of top-down, fixed forms.

At PQ 2011, one could find a few lingering explicit representations of the performance building as spectacular, rarified-object. Atelier Jean Nouvel's blue-mesh and glass magic lantern/projection screen (the Danish Radio House) was appropriately presented via projection on the Architecture Section Media Tower scrim.[2] The Danish Radio House, in its double layered, scale-less wrapper, had more to offer than it revealed; it necessitated exploration, as perception through its wrapper

revealed nothing of the complex, public foyer or "meteor" symphony hall within. Similar iconic objects also appeared at the PQ on Lithuania's table, presenting the *NEXT* theater as either prismatic crystals caught in mid-performance of a striptease or organic orbs cloaked in triangular tessellations.

More prevalent at the experimental edges of both the Architecture Section and the national exhibits at the PQ were more subtle interpretations of performativity that pushed the definition of performance beyond spectacle and icon into notions of mutable and responsive organisms, performing within the context of complex systems and networks, be they ecological, social, political, or material.

Snøhetta – Oslo Opera House, Oslo

Performative Urban/Landscape Networks
Over the last several decades, architecture has attempted to extend its grasp and relevance into larger spaces and questions by embracing the media of landscape and infrastructure. This attempt has produced a range of chimera—from buildings that wear plant matter as a form of decorative jewelry (Nouvel's Musée du quai Branly, Paris, to name just one of many), to structures enveloping themselves so completely in earth and greenery as to masquerade as landscape, (such as Perrault's Ewha Women's University Campus, Seoul), to buildings that nearly negate their existence as architecture in order to frame nature (Kengo Kuma's Noh Theater in the Forest, Toyoma, Japan), to those that draw clues from natural systems in an attempt to behave like nature (Mick Pearce's Eastgate Center, Harare, Zimbabwe). Each of these models, to differing degrees of success, attempt to undo the object nature of buildings and to re-tune architecture spatially and environmentally so that it performs as part of larger ecologies.

Singapore – *Ghostwalking: Take Possession*

Infrastructures and landscapes, as systems rather than objects, inherently offer possibilities for social, environmental, and spatial variation and diverse performances, not only as a result of scale, but also in response to the varied local conditions that such networks encounter. As a by-product of this spatial diversity, such sites naturally encourage meandering, site-specific performance work as well as impromptu civic events.

One example of a hybrid architecture/landscape/infrastructure constructing diverse situations for performance is New York City's High Line (see p. 63). This previously abandoned infrastructure, transformed by the team of Diller Scofidio and Renfro (Architects) and James Corner/Field Operations (Landscape Architect) into an elevated landscape promenade, has prompted extensive unplanned exhibitionism and spectacle created by the public. Additionally it was the site of the 2011 recreation of Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece* and several Performa 2009 events.[3] One of the High Line's architects, Charles Renfro, in his PQ 2011 talk "When is a Theater?" unraveled the multitude of performative instances designed into it. Along the High Line's length it distributes instances of social and spatial performance, simultaneous stage and voyeuristic opportunities, and it sets up choreographies of public encounter. On stage are the public present, those on the streets below, and the city's skyscrapers and rivers beyond. To answer the lecture title's question, on the High Line a theater is whenever one looks, whenever one performs; theater is all the time.

A second example of hybrid architecture/landscape/infrastructure, in which performative opportunities are developed in section rather than in length, is Snøhetta's Norwegian National Opera and Ballet in Oslo (2008). As urban intervention the project, like the High Line, has transformed an industrial area of the city. It fit into the psyche and space of the city through its mimicry of fjords, and it delicately straddles the terrain between performance space as imposed object and as landscape/infrastructure. The marble hard-scape surface that topographically negotiates waterfront to rooftop through folding undeniably performs as a multifaceted site of civic event, and it smoothes the connections between the pre-existing urban context and the new economic and cultural catalyst it envelops.
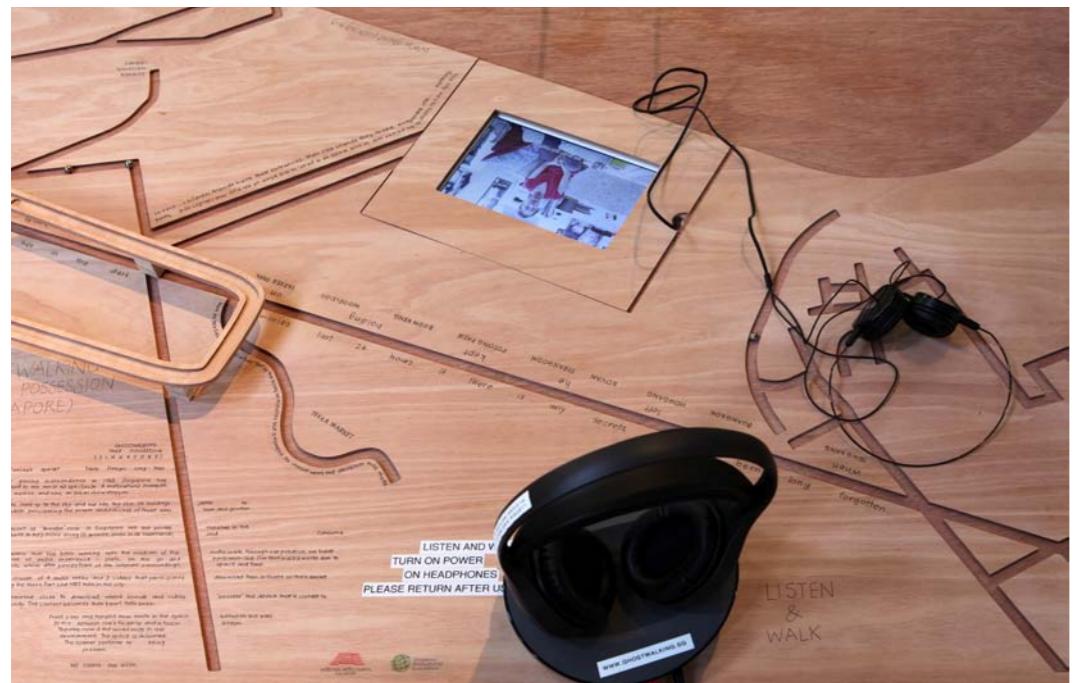
In contrast to the physical massiveness of such infrastructural projects as the Oslo Opera and the High Line, two PQ entries drew attention to existing environmental scenographies through their near absence of physical infrastructure. Singapore's *Ghostwalking: Take Possession* (curated by Kaylene Tan), through the medium of the "audiowalk," and Norway's largely landscaped *Performative Roads* (curated by Serge von Arx) presented works that focused "spectator" awareness and engagement on culturally significant environments, both natural and urban, and of past and present human presence that form individual and collective identities. Both *Ghost Walking* and *Performative Roads* demanded that the spectator move through the scenographic environment. *Performative Roads* explicitly sought to provoke "awareness of the surroundings [through the use of] a spatial dramaturgy" of the "promenade architecturale."[4] Small viewing shelters, such as the Bicycle House and Panoramic Hotel, explicitly served as support for witnessing the landscape's mutable performance while the delicate wood plank walkways and installations of the Look Out Point trails and Memorial in Memory of the Victims of Witch Trials implicated the walking spectators in the making of their experience, juxtaposing themselves and historical others against these sites. As a representation of architectural/landscape tourism, von Arx created nine postcards as souvenirs. Regarding *Ghostwalking*, Kaylene

REX/OMA, Josh Prince-Ramus/Rem Koolhaas – Wyly Theater, Dallas

Tan wrote, "Press play and theatre now exists in the space between the ears, in the space between one's fingertip and a touch screen. Theatre now is the wired body in the environment. The space is activated. The listener performs by being present."[5] Both landscape and urban scenographies demand presence and the reinvention of the performance by every individual guided through its spatial/sonic structure.

Public Square within the Urban Network
The Open Spatial Laboratory, through architect Omar Kahn's workshop and lecture touching upon Brambilla and Longo's *Handbook for Pedestrian Action*, Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, and Cedric Price's designs for the unrealized Fun Palace, explored a more politically charged facet of the public's performance within urban infrastructural networks. Particularly relevant in light of the Arab Spring events that continued to play out in public spaces around the Middle East during the PQ, Kahn drew the PQ public's attention to the power of the crowd, both in the virtual space and time of social media and in physical gathering places of cities around the globe. Evoking the conflicting and conflated screen/scene, the emergence and daily transformation of new social and political forms and their spaces in real time pointed to the continued importance of "showing up," of participation in person, in space, in live events, not just being seen on the screen.[6]

The contributions from Mexico (gold-medal winner) leveraged the city square and its network of civic structures as potent places of performative and political, action. Through the device of shelving scaffold chaotically packed with videos and artifacts, Mexico's Teatro Ojo linked the three presented projects (*¿No!, Pasajes* and *Visitas Guiadas*) under the title *Within a Failing State*. The presentation intentionally evoked the "open and unstable spaces of public buildings, plazas, streets, and shopping centers" that Teatro Ojo appropriate for their works. Similar to the meandering through

Mexico – *Within a Failing State*

these urban networks of plazas, streets, and shopping arcades, the three projects projects, and their representation on industrial metal shelving presented unresolved fragments to be explored and interpreted through the spectator's physical engagement with the space.

New York-based Lebanese architects L.E.FT (Ziad Jamaleddine and Makram el-Kadi) contributed one of few propositions that addressed the physical presence of PQ 2011 public in real space, and its performance beyond the role of presentation device. Worked into this literal prayer-rug's patterning, to be installed with proper orientation in global space for it to play that role, was a map of an architectural performance—a proposed maritime trajectory from port to port that Aldo Rossi's Teatro del Mondo, reinterpreted with minarets, would travel.

Performative Architectural Machines
If city and landscape can be understood as diverse layered networks, as ecosystems with zones of intensity and flows of information, architecture, and particularly performative architecture, is also comprised of systems that order, regulate, and transform spatial, material, energetic, and environmental changes over time. Historically technology and systems in buildings have been conceptualized either as *machines*—artificial/man-made, modular and regulated; or as organisms—natural, heterogeneous, and homeostatically self-regulating.

The understanding of theater architecture as a performative machine building is not new. We are all familiar with the playful magic and beauty of Renaissance perspective scenery, baroque fly lofts, and wave machines, and from the utopian event architecture of the 1960's and 70's with their transformable, modular kits of parts, comprised of trusses, catwalks, projection screens, and inflatable devices. Cedric Price's Fun Palace and the Metabolist festival pavilions of the Osaka '70 Expo exemplify the building-as-machine, or, if you will, infrastructural buildings designed to support the urban crowd.

A recent addition to this lineage of theater-machine-building and assembled kit of parts is the Wyly Theater, designed by REX/Joshua Prince-Ramus and OMA/Rem Koolhaas—a vertical jewel-box in Dallas, Texas, that clearly celebrates its technical, mechanistic performance. It boasts not just any old fly (tower), but a state of the art "superfly" tower; a choreography of seating and decking components to completely reconfigure stage-audience space during the intermission interval.[7] It proudly displays (and publishes broadly) its bright green machinery spaces.[8]

Following similar principles of a flexible and reconfigurable kit of parts, Greece's (gold-medal) presentation of the Athens National Theater's New Stage (*Nea Skini*) invited the PQ audience to interact with the scale models of these modular seating components that their designers (Stefanos Pantos and Andreas Skourtis) referred to as a "spatial formation tool." The second project for a *Machine Theater* (designed by Flux-Office) even more aggressively explored the notion of theater as

mutable machine, with its three theater spaces that, through collapsible and movable parts, opened and connected both to an archeological dig below, views of the city beyond, and internally to each other to create one single connected performance space. Transformation of space over time was represented through a sequence of abstract, cut and folded paper models. Here, too, the curators invited interaction, by offering to the public postcards printed with the Machine Theater's pattern to be cut out, folded, and assembled.
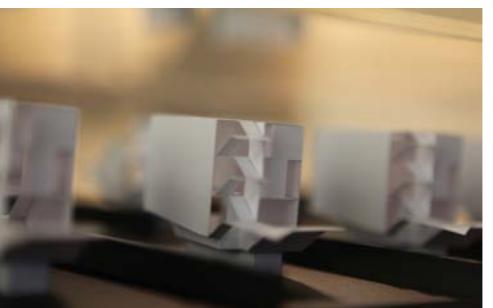
Flux-Office – Machine Theater

Aggregations

The kit of parts as strategy for making varied spatial conditions accommodating diverse performances also has a more organic, less mechanistic manifestation. Such a strategy of aggregated and differentiated spatial components underlay Oren Sagiv's design for the PQ's *Intersection* . Here the notion of a system was not in the service of physical transformation of a singularity over time, but rather, through variations of limited constructive or spatial components, offering diversity to accommodate a range of installations and performances. Sagiv's clustering of differentiated exhibition/performance spaces and interstitial spaces between them invited exploration and participatory action. Like the containers, the content was heterogeneous, held together conceptually and physically with an explicitly and beautifully developed "glue" – a porous lath of plywood profiles. This secondary system gave a consistent connective tissue to the differentiated *Intersection* pavilion volumes, while negotiating the "local" conditions of its terrain as it climbed from the plaza level to an elevated second story while maintaining the transparency (visual, luminous, and acoustic) between the bar inhabiting the space above, with its revelers, and the participant-visitors within *Intersection*'s labyrinth below.
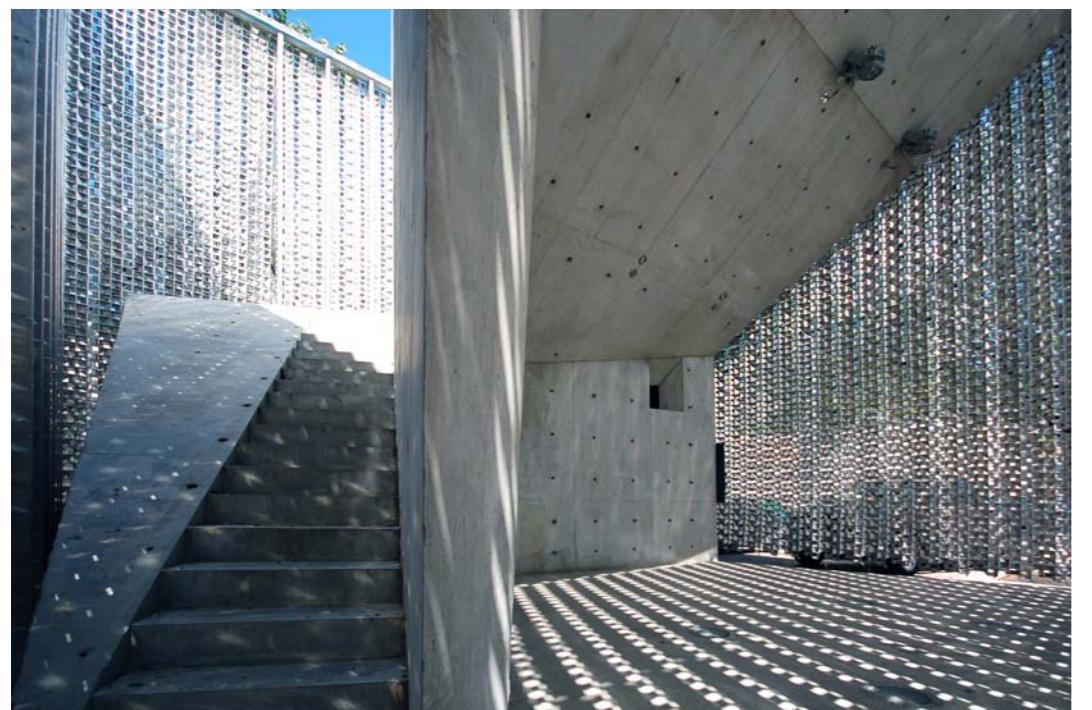

5468796 Architecture Inc – OMS Stage, Winnipeg

Kadarik Tüür Arhitektid Oü – Noor Eesty Scenery, Talinn

Aggregation may be seen as the logical spatial approach towards uniting heterogeneous components, or similar components that acquire their specific purpose through adjacency. Or this can be interpreted not as mere pragmatic adaptation to local condition but also as an analog for the underlying complexity of (seemingly) monolithic entities. The Opéra-Palette, by theater architect Jacques Plante (Canada), proposed to work with a limited palette, in this case literally the ubiquitous wooden shipping pallet, as the material to spatially order and physically structure diverse spaces within the courtyard of Quebec City's Conservatoire. The strategies of limited palette, of repurposed or fabricated components, within a clear spatial and material system has become a predictable strategy employed by younger architectural practices in response to their frequently small scale, low-budget, ephemeral, pop-up event commissions. Kadarik Tüür Arhitektid's temporary outdoor summer stage for Noor Eesty Scenery in Estonia employed this strategy, constructing stages and backdrops, visual enclosure and inclusion of the landscape for twelve performances all from seemingly identical timber sections, to be recycled at the conclusion of the season. Winnipeg-based 5468796 Architecture similarly deployed small elements, in this case obliquely cut aluminum extrusions, to define an operable cubic volume around a summer festival stage area located in the city's Old Market Square. The OMS Stage is performative by virtue of the reflectivity and refraction organized through the orientation of the aluminum components in its surface, with the spatial performance upholding the old standards of object in a field and of platform stage in opposition to audience space.

What each of these works, constructed from small components, attempts to do is negotiate between the perceptual performance at the intimate scale of the human body and the scale of urban space. However, the OMS stage clearly fits into the theater-as-object-to-be-unwrapped category while the Noor Eesty Scenery, through its meandering network of surfaces, remains ungraspable except through experience.

Soma Architecture – Synaesthetic Filter

Screen/Scene

The OMS Stage points towards the tension Chris Salter referred to as Screen/Scene—the "friction between an architecture of performative space versus an architecture of performance originating at the intelligent skin." (106) At the cutting edge of digital design practices—that employ parametric modeling, environmental simulation, and other feedback loops in the design process, and responsive systems and materials in their built form—other performativities, beyond perceptual, potentially come into play. Although many projects emerging from digitally experimental practices reveal a distraction by the performativity of the surface at the expense of the performativity of the space, there are increasingly emerging and established practices attempting to bridge the gap between spatial and surface performances. One such attempt was Stefan Rutzinger and Kristina Schinegger's competition proposal for a mobile pavilion for experimental music, dubbed Synaesthetic Filter. Chains of acoustically tuned tubes—containing a combination of reflective or absorptive materials—would rotate in relation to the undulating metal mesh roof, adjusting the spatial as well as the acoustic experience.

The more established Danish practice of Henning Larsen, responsible for the 2004 Danish Opera, also attempted (though not motivated by digital explorations) to bridge the gap between spatial and surface performances in their recently completed Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Centre, in Reykjavik. Collaborating with local firm Batterííð Architects and perceptual-performance-obsessed artist Olafur Elíasson, the team created not a singular object building but a collection of volumes enveloped with a hive-like aggregation of colorful, light-refracting prisms. Images from the opening celebrations reveal the potential for multiple performances—of changing color and light off its exterior surface and into its foyer space, and of the social kind as well. Through the human-scaled prisms of the foyer's envelope and its terraced interior, the building perhaps proposes a middle ground within the spectrum of performance discussed above, between the spectacular nature of scale-less, smooth object-theaters and the performative opportunities worked into open-ended networks and aggregated assemblies.
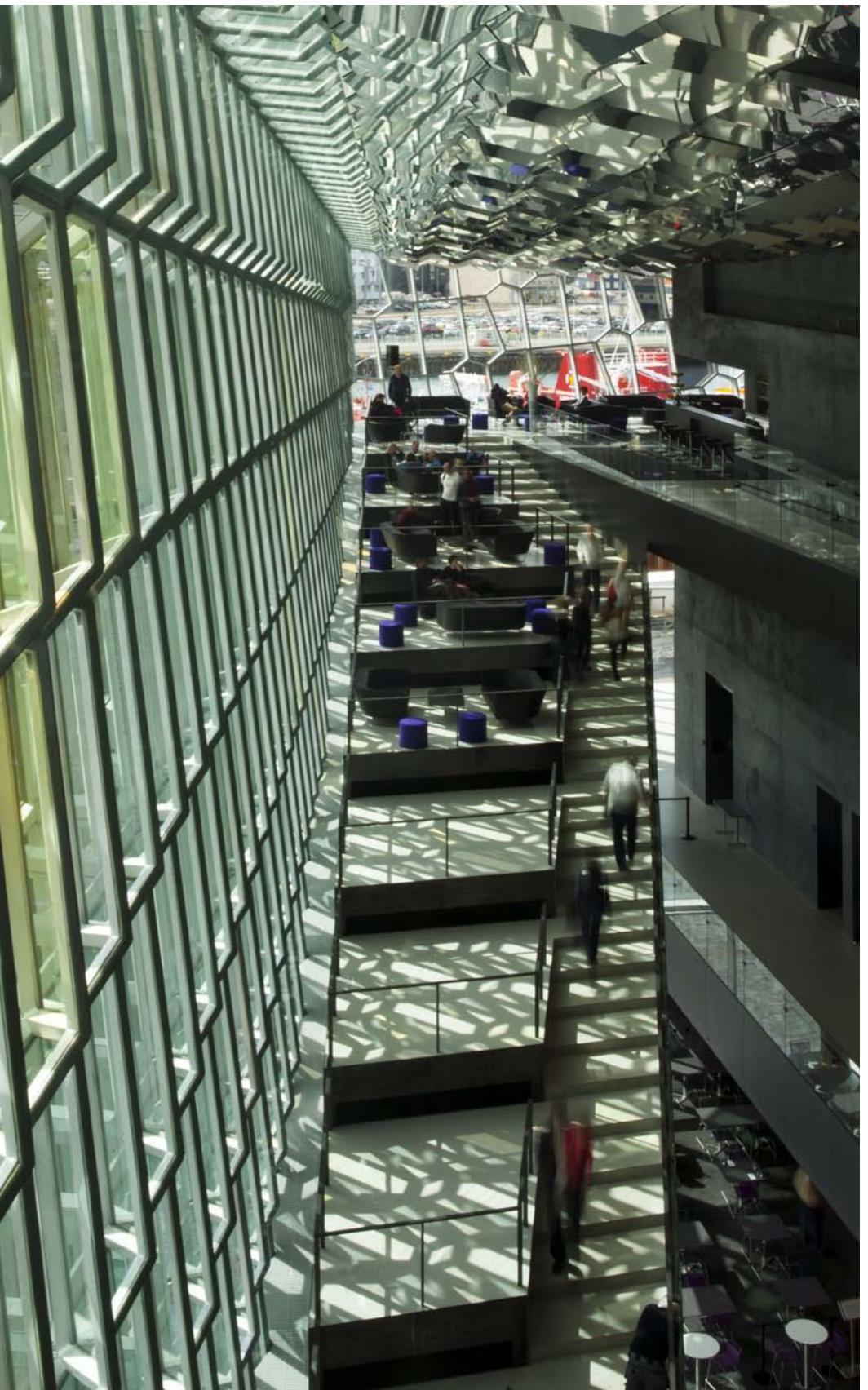
Henning Larsen Architects – Harpa – Reykjavik Concert Hall and Conference Centre, Reykjavik

Signs for the future seem to point away from the cult of the object building as intervention separated from the civic space surrounding it. So many of the projects discussed here and presented at PQ 2011 offered interwoven relationships between larger urban spaces or landscapes and the specific site or sites of the performances, be that between the ears of the spectator, in public plazas, or on a designated area of carpet on the floor of the Crossroads. Those sites of performance normally defined as buildings increasingly seem to mutate and transform, opening internally or to views of the city or landscape surrounding them, transforming during the course of the performance or temporarily taking over the public square. Theater has not gone (wrong); it has left its discrete, consolidated house to distribute its performance throughout the city.

Notes:

[1] The American journal *Architectural Record's* cover story for January 2011 highlighted the themes that dominated the last decade including: cities/urbanism and re-envisioning suburbs, spectacle buildings, disaster relief and the environment, local/global practices and mega firms, as well as diverse topics touching on technological advances in computing, material research, structures, and the economy.

[2] The Media Tower featured 3-minute videos of the NOW/NEXT spaces of performance, continuously projected in random order. Nouvel's DRDK project was represented through a documentary created by the building's client, the Danish Radio.

[3] Friends of the High Line presented Trisha Brown Dance Company's recreation of *Roof Piece* June 9-11th, 2011 on the occasion of the work's 40th anniversary. "In this work, ten dancers stationed on rooftops mimic each other's movements in an improvised and mutable series of movements. The piece (was) recreated on roofs surrounding the southern end of the High Line, so that park visitors (were) encircled by the performance as it unfold(ed)…" (http://www.thehighline.org/about/public-art/trisha-brown)

[4] von Arx, Serge. "The National Norwegian Tourist Routes: Remote Encounters With Nature," ERA21 magazine, No. 03/2011 "Sceno-Architecture." (http://www.era21.cz/sceno-architecture.pdf) 6. [This article describes the project Vedahaugane in Aurlandsfjellet, Norway by LJB AS with Mark Dion, 2010.]

[5] Tan, Kaylene. "Singapore", *PQ 2011 Catalogue*, Web: http://www.pq.cz/en/architecture-section-on-line.html?itemID=172&type=architecture

[6] "Screen/Scene" as coined by Chris Salter (Entangled, p 106) refers to a related but specifically contemporary architectural dilemma, in which performativity has relocated from space to smart surfaces. This topic will be addressed at the end of the essay.

[7] The "superfly" not only suggests the superhero performance of the building's expanded fly-tower space and machinery, but also the soul and funk of Curtis Mayfield's 1972 hit soundtrack album and song of the same name.

[8] "Drama in the City, "C3, No 304, p 74-87.

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